

## ***Expanding Primary Care Providers in Rural Areas***

### **Background**

Access to health care services in rural areas of Wisconsin has been described as a lack of provider access. This description implies that the number of hospitals and clinics in rural Wisconsin is not sufficient to serve the rural population. However, even with an abundance of some providers access is often not readily available to certain segments of the population. According to the Wisconsin Office of Rural Health (WORH), however, there is actually a good network of hospitals and clinics through the state.

A problem that exists in the rural health environment is a lack of certain health care professionals. WORH and the Division of Public Health track and designate areas of the state as Health Professional Shortage Areas (HSPAs). There are areas and populations that need dental, medical, mental health services professionals and pharmacists. Additionally, recent trends indicated by the recent reduction of medical students choosing family medicine as a specialty suggest that the supply of family physicians could fall short of the demand in the near future.

To try and meet these shortages WORH has several programs in place to recruit health professionals into the shortage areas. Some of the programs include the Recruitment and Retention Program-New Physicians for Wisconsin; two Loan Assistance Programs for physicians and for NPs, PAs, and CNMs. Associated with the WORH are training programs such as the AHEC and the expected federal funding for an Interdisciplinary Rural Health Course developed through an Interdisciplinary Rural Health Training Grant

Rural providers are also burdened by the inequities of Medicare provider reimbursements. The rural population tends to be older and many providers have 50% to 60% of their total patient load attributable to Medicare patients. To address this particular inequity, the Balanced Budget Act of 1997 established the Medicare Rural Hospital Flexibility Program, which created the Critical Access Hospital (CAH) as a new type of provider eligible for cost-based Medicare and Medicaid reimbursement. The State of Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Office of Rural Health, the Wisconsin Health and Hospital Association and the Rural Wisconsin Health Cooperative are all working with nearly twenty hospitals that either have become or are in the process of becoming certified as Critical Access Hospitals. There are perhaps another 15 to 20 hospitals in the state that could be eligible for this certification.

Based upon this information it is possible that one or more of the task force's recommendations could assist in providing access to health

insurance to those served in the shortage areas. Changes to the current method of Medicare reimbursement, for example, could possibly assist rural health networks in their recruitment efforts by freeing up some of the resources currently being used to fill the reimbursement gaps. More information can be found at the WORH Internet site at <http://www.worh.org/>.